

Remarks of Prof. Joseph Alcamo, Chief Scientist of UNEP
on behalf of UNEP at Opening Session of 31st Session
of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Bali, 26 October, 2009

It has been over 20 years since UNEP helped found the IPCC and we continue our unflinching support for the Panel. We are more proud than ever that IPCC scientists devote so much of their time *pro bono* to evaluating an avalanche of publications on all aspects of the climate change question and manage to summarize this knowledge in a clear way for society-at-large. IPCC is, and will continue to be, the main clearinghouse for assessing knowledge about the climate system and its implications on society. UNEP, at the same time, complements the work of IPCC by pursuing its core mandate – Keeping the global environment under review and reporting its findings to member states. Some of this work obviously has connections to climate science and policy. The list includes:

- We are conducting an integrated assessment of the role of black carbon and tropospheric ozone on climate change and air pollution, with the assessment report to be ready by end 2010.
- We are discussing with the scientific community the establishment of a PRO-VIA secretariat to help the community coordinate its research on climate impacts, vulnerability and adaptation, and
- We have just produced a “Climate Change Science Compendium” which is an answer to the UNEP mandate to identify and report emerging environmental threats on the global scale. Of course, to effectively survey the horizon for emerging threats we have to keep climate change in sight; and we have to be alert to the ways in which climate change interacts with the rest of the global environment. For example, the ocean chapter in the Compendium reports on recent findings about how climate change is transforming the ocean environment through acidification, warming and other processes. Such new knowledge is indispensable to another UNEP responsibility – preparing the so-called “Assessment of the Assessments” leading to the regular monitoring and reporting about the State of the Marine Environment for the UN General Assembly. In short, it is UNEP’s job to keep the global environment under review and of course we have to keep a sharp eye on climate change and its connection to other global environmental problems. In this way we complement the efforts of IPCC and are ready to work with you to get more value out of our individual efforts.

Many of you are aware that I am not only representing UNEP at this meeting but also a veteran of 15 years of IPCC work. Over this time I have had the chance to contribute to evaluating and developing scenarios, assessing continental-scale impacts, and other tasks. Of the many impressions I have from these years, one of the strongest is how IPCC has long and hard asserted itself on the turbulent frontier between climate science and climate policy.

My impression is also that this frontier will not be getting any quieter over the coming years. Yet despite the ongoing turbulence, the IPCC needs to engage itself even more energetically at the science-policy interface. Why? Because as policymakers and the public begin to grasp the multi-billion dollar price tag for mitigating and adapting to climate change, we should expect a sharper questioning of the science behind climate policy. Meanwhile, the deluge of results coming from all directions of climate science will require a still vaster effort to interpret these results for non-scientists. Added to this, IPCC will sometimes have to play the honest scientific broker as different sets of scientific results argue for different, and sometimes contradictory, climate strategies. For these and other reasons the IPCC has to be ready to explain more often and in more non-scientific venues the complexities of climate processes and the intricacies of climate mitigation and adaptation. With this in mind, new, creative ways are needed to bring scientists and policymakers together. (Other than convening them once every four years to negotiate a Summary for Policymakers.) An ongoing forum for talks between scientists and policymakers would be useful, perhaps along the lines of the UNEP/EC-financed “Science-Policy Dialogues” now taking place around the world with the support of the IPCC. The fact of the matter is that scientists and policymakers are educated differently, have different priorities, and to an extent speak different languages; so special effort is needed to help close the gap between their worlds.

Faced with an increasing workload, it won't be easy for IPCC, by itself, to reach out even more to decision makers and civil society. But UNEP is ready to work with its colleagues at the IPCC to help close this critical gap between science and policy.